

ONLINE JOURNALISM GIVES READERS MORE CONTROL OVER INFORMATION

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WASHINGTON, MAY 2 -- Online journalism has certain attributes of print journalism and of broadcast journalism, and other attributes that are unique to the Web. Frequently Web sites offer news articles that are to be read, just as they would be in a newspaper. At other times, the audience may select a video clip, so the Web site resembles a TV broadcast. An online story that takes full advantage of the new medium allows the reader to become a participant, choosing his or her own path through the information presented. "Only if there is some element of control by the user is it a new story form," says Nora Paul, director of the University of Minnesota's Institute for New Media Studies.

"Online journalists must think on multiple levels at once: words, ideas, story structure, design, interactives, audio, video, photos, news judgment," says Jonathan Dube, publisher of CyberJournalist.net, a Web site that focuses on how the Internet and other technologies are changing the media. "TV is about showing the news. Print is more about telling and explaining. Online is about showing, telling, demonstrating, and interacting." To make that possible, online journalists present information in layers, using a variety of story forms.

Online Story Forms

The most basic online-story form has been described as "print plus." It's a text story that includes additional elements like photographs, audio, and video, or hyperlinks to more information. By embedding links, the journalist can take the reader to additional information on separate Web pages, some of which may be provided by sources outside the news organization, with more background or history. Online stories can be enhanced by including links to databases that a user can search. For example, a story about falling test scores at secondary schools across the country could link to a database of results from all schools. The user could search for a specific school, for all schools in a particular city, or compare the results of different schools.

A more innovative approach uses "clickable interactives" or multimedia graphics specifically designed to illustrate a story. The graphic elements are laid out in linear fashion, but the reader can explore them independently in any order. The same is true of most online "slide-shows," which combine text and audio with still photographs in a multi-media experience for the user.

Tools that allow the reader to navigate through a 360-degree view of a location can enhance online storytelling, too. So can Flash animation, one of the software programs that allows you to design interactive content: video, graphics, and animation. For example, the BBC in London created a Web site about illegal drugs and alcohol that allowed the reader to “choose” a particular drug and dosage, and then select a part of the body -- like the brain or heart -- to read about the effects of that drug on that organ, as well as safety information. Online sites even have used quizzes and games to tell stories by breaking the information into questions and answers and letting the user discover what the reporter has already learned.

Online Writing

Online writing, says Jonathan Dube, is a cross between print and broadcast writing. He maintains that the short, simple style favored by broadcasters makes online writing easier to follow. But he says too many Web sites ignore the basic rules of good writing. A conversational tone is good, says Dube, but grammar and spelling still matter. Television news manager Scott Atkinson says his best advice is to write for the Internet as you would write an e-mail to a friend. “That doesn’t mean you can misspell words, ignore story structure, or leave out context,” he says. “What it does mean is you should write in the most intimate style you can muster.”

Because Web-based news sites tend to offer readers many choices, writers should avoid delayed or anecdotal leads that don’t quickly indicate what a story is about. The lead should give the reader a good reason to continue reading; otherwise, he or she probably will click on another story. Stories on line generally are shorter than newspaper stories. A good guideline is to limit an online story to about 800 words and to keep it all on one page. Studies have found that readers are willing to scroll through text on line; there is no need to force them to click to additional pages for more of the same story. But to make the text easier to absorb, Dube suggests that online writers break the text into more blocks and use more subheads and bullet points to separate ideas than they would in print.

Online journalism may allow readers to respond immediately and directly to the writer or editor via e-mail or even in a live chat. In addition, many sites provide space for readers to post their feedback or opinions, so others can read what they have written and respond. Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) in the United States solicits input for stories both on the air and online. Listeners are asked to call or e-mail additional information. Stories on the MPR Web site include a “Help us cover this story” link, so the audience can add comments and insights.

MPR also surveys its audience before producing special reports, such as an examination of the state’s economy. MPR News Vice President Bill Buzenberg says audience input results in “much more sophisticated reporting, with more depth and lots of real-world examples and voices.”

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